

REO HIGHLIGHTS

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

The U.S. Department of State's East and South-east Asia Regional Environmental Affairs Office publishes this newsletter for informational purposes only.

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Regional Environment,
Science, Technology and
Health (ESTH) Hub for
East and Southeast Asia
U.S. Embassy Bangkok

+66-2 205-4712
REOBangkok@state.gov



To subscribe, unsubscribe,
comment or submit ideas,
please email
REOBangkok@state.gov

January 2016

Vietnam, U.S. co-host Lower Mekong Initiative Regional Working Group Meeting in Hanoi



On December 15-16, Vietnam and the United States co-hosted the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) Eighth Regional Working Group (RWG) Meeting and Friends of the Lower Mekong (FLM) Working Group Meeting in Hanoi. Nearly 160 participants from six LMI members, (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand, the United States of America, and Vietnam), from members of the Friends of the Lower Mekong (FLM), (Australia, the European Union and Japan), and the ASEAN Secretariat attended. At the meeting, participants discussed implementing the new LMI Master Plan of Action 2016-2020 approved at the LMI Ministerial Meeting held in Kuala Lumpur in August 2015. The LMI Master Plan of Action calls for LMI and FLM members to develop collaborative approaches to address complex, transnational development and policy challenges. Discussions focused on integrating the cross-cutting areas of the water, energy, and food security nexus and gender equality and women's empowerment into the six LMI "Pillars" or areas of cooperation. The concept of the water, energy, and food security nexus describes how these three sectors are intricately linked and how actions in one area often impact one or both of the sectors. LMI's commitment to equal representation and women's entrepreneurship recognizes the need for projects that engage women as engines of development and the contributions of women to economic development. During the RWG meeting, LMI representatives set the framework for policy discussions on these cross-cutting issues and established objectives for future projects designed to support the initiative's policy priorities.



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Nations Unite in Global Agreement on Climate Change: Paris Agreement for the first time binds rich and poor governments into reducing greenhouse-gas emissions



Under the "Paris Agreement," 195 countries agreed to an ambitious, durable global framework centered on legally binding obligations for all Parties to put forward nationally determined contributions to global mitigation efforts every five years, and to report on progress towards the implementation and achievement of those contributions using common transparency guidelines. The Agreement lays out a strong global goal to hold global temperature rise "well below" 2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels and to pursue efforts to limit the temperature increase to 1.5 °C. The Agreement contains a global adaptation goal to enhance adaptive capacity, strengthen resilience and reduce vulnerability to climate change.

In addition, there is continued commitment to the provision and mobilization of climate finance by developed countries, recognizing that such mobilization is a global effort. The accompanying COP decisions re-establish - through 2025 - the \$100 billion mobilization goal set in Copenhagen for developed country Parties, and set out the expectation that a new goal will be set prior to 2025 – with a broader donor base - from a floor of \$100 billion per year.



The deal also requires action for the first time from developing nations, including large emitters such as China and India, to find ways to lower the trajectory of their emissions growth as soon as possible.

President Obama visited the COP in the opening days of negotiations, alongside almost 150 Heads of State, to set the tone for constructive negotiations and emphasize the need to reach an ambitious agreement in Paris. Remarks can be found [here](#) and more details regarding the agreement can be found [here](#).

PARIS2015
UN CLIMATE CHANGE CONFERENCE
COP21·CMP11

REPORT: GLACIER ON TIBETAN PLATEAU RETREATING



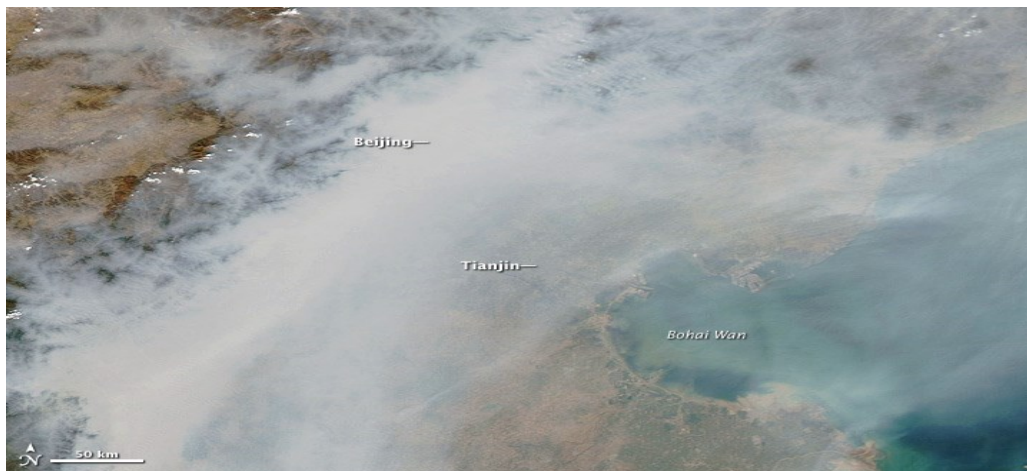
Glacier on the Tibetan plateau has been backing off since the 20th century due to rising temperature, and at a faster speed since 1990s, according to a report on the environmental change in the region released on Wednesday. The scientific evaluation report on environmental change of the Tibetan plateau was published by the Institute of Tibetan Plateau Research under Chinese Academy of Sciences.

The report said, glacier's response to the climate change can be best seen in the progress or retreat of the glacier. Glacier loss in the Tibetan plateau is most prominent in the Himalayan Mountains and the southeastern Tibet, whereas glacier stays relatively stable, even progressing, in the Karakoram and Western Kunlun region due to increasing precipitation, the report said. Both number and area of lakes on the Tibetan plateau increased notably. The number of lakes exceeding 1 square kilometers climbed from 1,081 in the 1970s to 1,236 in 2010, and 80 percent of lakes in the region have been expanding.

Meanwhile, due to glacier melt, increased precipitation and reduced evaporation, water level in 152 of the 200 lakes in the region with ICESat laser altimeter data rose, while that in the rest 48 dropped, the report said.

[More...](#)

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After Several "Red Alerts" Beijing to Invest 30b Yuan (\$4.7 b) to Improve Air Quality

China Daily reported that the Beijing municipal government will invest 30 billion yuan (\$4.7 billion) to curb severe air pollution. According to official reports, in the first 10 months of 2015, Beijing saw an improvement in air quality, with concentration of PM2.5 – fine particulates that pose human health hazards – reaching 69.7 micrograms per cubic meter, a year-on-year reduction of 21.8 percent. However, in November and December, Beijing was hit with the worst PM2.5 levels recorded, resulting in "red alert" days where schools are closed, construction sites are shut down, and traffic is severely limited. The capital will put more focus on solving such thorny problems in the next two to three years, and allocate 30 billion yuan to promote the curbing efforts and projects in a bid to further improve air quality in the capital the government said. In December, the State Council announced plans to reduce pollutants emitted by coal-fired power plants by 60 percent through 2020 and the National Development and Reform Commission (NDRC) announced that, starting January 1, it would pay incentives to coal-fired power plants that meet emissions requirements.

EPA Working with Jiangsu Province on Air Quality



The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and RTI International met with Jiangsu Province environmental officials to continue collaboration on an air quality management plan. EPA and RTI are providing technical assistance to Jiangsu environmental officials. China's Ministry of Environmental Protection (MEP) tasked Jiangsu to study best practices to reduce air pollution, and Jiangsu plans to reduce their yearly PM2.5 level to 20 percent of their 2012 level by 2017. The three-year project will conclude in 2016.

ICRI Second General Meeting, Thailand 2015:

The second General Meeting, of the International Coral Reef Initiative (ICRI) under the Japan-Thailand Secretariat, was held December 1-4, 2015 in Pattaya, Thailand. A consortium of ocean scientists, reef mappers and community-based monitoring teams, including the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), discussed global coral bleaching. Increased ocean temperatures due to climate change, combined with the warming effects of an El Niño pattern and a Pacific warm water mass referred to as “The Blob,” are driving temperatures to record levels and threatening to severely deplete the coral reef ecosystems that support fish habitats, shoreline protection and coastal economies.

At the meeting, experts announced that this confluence of events (only the third of its kind in recorded history) is expected to impact approximately 38% of the world’s coral reefs by the end of this year and kill over 12,000 square kilometers (4,633 square miles) of reefs, according to NOAA. Although reefs represent less than 0.1 percent of the world’s ocean floor, they help support approximately 25 percent of all marine species. As a result, the livelihoods of 500 million people and income worth over \$30 billion are at stake.

A summary of these findings, as well as new information about coral bleaching and never before seen high-resolution imagery was shared at the event.

Indonesia's forest fires



Indonesia’s tropical forests represent some of the most diverse habitats on the planet. The 2015 fire outbreaks add to decades of existing deforestation by palm oil, timber and other agribusiness operators, further imperiling endangered species such as the orangutan. Fires were particularly rampant this year due to high temperatures and little rainfall. The human cost is stark; at least 19 people died and an estimated 500,000 cases of respiratory tract infections were reported since the start of the fires. It’s estimated that the fires could cause more than 100,000 premature deaths in the region. Financial damage to the region’s economy is still being counted, but the Indonesian government’s own estimates suggest it could be as high as \$47bn, a huge blow to the country’s economy. [More...](#)

Counting Carbon: From Mangroves to Mountain Tops

Between land and sea lies a forest of trees and shrubs called “mangroves.” They help protect livelihoods for vulnerable populations that depend on the fish, crab and shrimp that live in them. From mangroves to mountain tops, the forests store carbon, which lower greenhouse gas emissions. Watch how the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and its partners help empower local villagers on how to keep these forests from disappearing. It is part of what USAID is doing across Asia to encourage women and other community members to learn about good, sustainable choices for their environment and to add their voices for strong forest management. Click the picture below, or [here](#) to watch the video.



USG GRANTEE ACTIVITY HIGHLIGHT

Reduce demand for illegal wildlife products in Laos: Free the Bears, Laos.



Founded by Mary Hutton in 1995, Free the Bears is a non-profit organization dedicated to protecting, preserving and enriching the lives of bears. One of the biggest challenges is rehabilitating rescued bears and providing care for their entire lives, which can be up to 30 years. While the organization gets bears of many shapes and sizes, one of the biggest reasons for bear rescues in South-East Asia is the illegal wildlife trade. Poachers' easiest target for live capture are cubs. Free the Bears' aim is to one day be able to rehabilitate bears and release them back to the wild, but this is becoming increasingly difficult to do, leading to many rescue facilities being at, or over, capacity. Bears need rehabilitation, food, living space, medical provisions and 24-hour attention. That's why the organization needs support to help these bears.

Through the small grants program, the REO Bangkok Hub co-funded a project at Tat Kuang Si Bear Rescue Centre (TKSBRC) in Luang Prabang, Laos. Through this project, Free the Bears is conducting education programs targeting three distinct demographic groups: students, local visitors, and international tourists. In addition, over 100 tour guides received training. Monitoring and evaluation protocols ensure that key messages are delivered in effective ways, leading to behavioral change and reduced demand for illegal wildlife products. Lessons learned are shared and used in the design and implementation of new environmental education initiatives in other Southeast Asian countries to reduce demand for illegal wildlife products.

The grant also helped fund the purchase of a new vehicle, called the B.E.A.R.-mobile by the team, for use in transporting school children for education programs as well as rescued bears (but

not at the same time!). The team in Laos has been extremely busy, with several recent rescues, bringing the facility to an over-capacity number of 29 at last count. You can see the team, and the B.E.A.R.-mobile in action in these exciting stories and rescue videos:

<http://www.freethebears.org/index.php/media-page/news-stories/94-abbrescuellaos>

<http://www.freethebears.org/index.php/media-page/news-stories/104-twin-moon-bear-cubs>

<https://www.facebook.com/freethebearsfund/videos/vb.117302048290717/1010072189013694/?type=2&theater>

<https://www.facebook.com/freethebearsfund/videos/vb.117302048290717/1015350248485888/?type=2&theater>



Greening U.S. Embassies Seminar



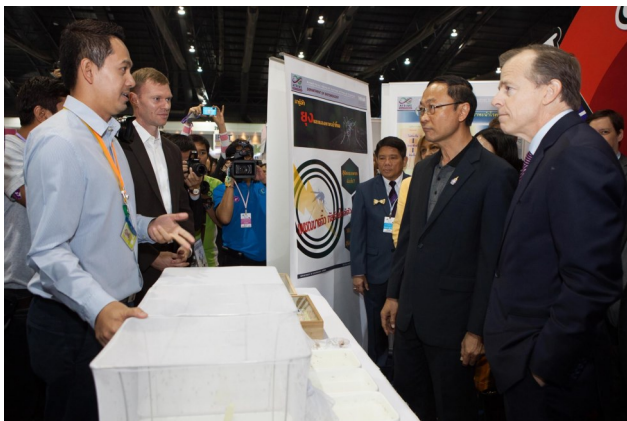
On Dec 3rd and 4th the U.S. Mission to Thailand hosted staff members from twenty U.S. embassies and consulates from around the world for an inaugural 'Greening U.S. Embassies Seminar' provided by the U.S. State Department's Bureau of Overseas Buildings Operations. The two-day seminar informed and trained U.S. diplomatic professionals on the tools and resources available to support high-performance buildings and greening activities such as reduced utility costs and greenhouse gas emissions. The seminar took place concurrently with the Climate Change discussions held at the international Conference of the Parties (COP) 21 in Paris, France. For more information about this initiative [see...](#)

DAS Margolis, U.S. Science Envoy Dr. Geri Richmond, conduct Science Diplomacy at the HCMC American Center

The Deputy Assistant Secretary for Science, Space, and Health Dr. Jonathan Margolis and Science Envoy Dr. Geraldine Richmond visited ConGen HCMC's American Center (AC) to observe demonstrations by the AC's robotics club and hold a discussion on STEM education with approximately 50 high school and university students on December 2. The AC Robotics Club, a collaboration with the HCMC University of Technology, formed earlier this year following a science fair attended by Dr. Richmond during her last visit to HCMC in June 2015. DAS Margolis and Dr. Richmond reviewed the club's projects, including a voice activated car and dinosaur, as well as self-driving vehicle prototypes. Following the robotics demonstration, DAS Margolis and Dr. Richmond shared their experiences working for the USG and in private research and fielded questions from event participants.



Ambassador Davies, Thailand's Minister of Science and Technology visit U.S. Pavilion at the 2015 National Science Fair



On November 15, Ambassador and Mrs. Davies attended the opening of the 2015 National Science and Technology Fair and hosted Minister of Science and Technology Dr. Pichet Durongkaveroj at the U.S. Pavilion. There they viewed AFRIMS and USAID exhibits which highlight U.S.-Thai collaboration to combat infectious diseases and mitigate climate change. At the U.S. Pavilion, they also explored some of the newest U.S. innovations from American firms Ford, Microsoft, and Stratasys 3D printing. Science Envoy Dr. Geraldine Richmond also conducted a lecture for young students to encourage their participation in STEM education.

MEKONG NEWS

ASEAN Chief Justices Reaffirm Commitment to Environmental Law Enforcement, Regional Cooperation



Fifth ASEAN Chief Justices' Roundtable on Environment 4-5 December, 2015 Siem Reap, Cambodia

The Fifth ASEAN Chief Justices' Roundtable on Environment was organized by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and hosted by the Supreme Court of Cambodia in Siem Reap on 3-5 December. High court judges from all 10 ASEAN countries and ADB's General Counsel, Christopher Stephens, discussed the challenges faced by ASEAN countries when applying laws on the environment and climate change, and determining complex issues of environmental impact, damage assessment, and valuation and adjudication, according to ADB.

Among the key issues discussed at the ASEAN roundtable were balancing the realities of economic development in the region and the need for environmental protection. Participants recognized the need for capacity building in areas such as environmental damage assessment; statutory penalties; the technical and financial issues of cleanup; restoration and remediation; and public interest environmental litigation. The roundtable also highlighted the significant progress made in creating national or regional working groups on environment, "greening benches", and building capacity for environmental adjudication, including judicial training and certification programs on the environment. [More...](#)

VOA Interview: With ASEAN Integration Come More Threats to Natural Resources

Toek Vannara, director of the NGO Forum, discusses the likely environmental problems Cambodia and other countries could face if they do not act to protect their natural resources. ASEAN integration started at end of 2015, opening the region to a free flow of goods and services across borders. But many analysts say Cambodia will have a difficult time integrating and benefiting from the cooperation. There are other downsides, as well. VOA Khmer recently spoke with Toek Vannara, director of the NGO Forum, to discuss the likely environmental problems Cambodia and other countries could face if they do not act to protect their natural resources. The English transcript can be found [here](#).



NEWS ITEMS OF INTEREST

ADB Loan to Aid Beijing in Pollution Control

The Asian Development bank has approved its first policy-based loan of 300 million U.S. dollars to China to help address air pollution problem in Beijing. Part of the loan will also go to air pollution control programs in Tianjin municipality and Hebei province, both neighboring Beijing, said the bank on December 10. The loan accompanies expected co-financing from KfW development bank of 150 million euros in support of the estimated expenditure of the Hebei Clean Air Action Plan 2015-2016 of 4.8 billion U.S. dollars in Hebei Province. Based on the bank's estimates, the policy actions will help reduce Hebei's annual coal consumption by about 12.4 million tons, representing about 4 percent of the province's total coal consumption in 2012. [Source: Xinhua, December 11, 2015]

Ninth Joint Committee Meeting (JCM) on Science and Technology Cooperation charts path for enhanced partnership

On Fifteen years after signing an agreement on cooperation in science and technology, Vietnam hosted the largest Vietnam-U.S. Joint Committee Meeting on Scientific and Technological Cooperation (JCM9) to date, with more than 180 participants, in Ho Chi Minh City from Dec. 2-3. Hosted by the Ministry of Science and Technology (MOST) with co-sponsorship from the Vietnam National University (VNU), JCM9 featured an open innovation forum and participation from 16 U.S. universities and businesses. OES DAS Margolis, the U.S. Head of Delegation, Ambassador Osius, as well as Science Envoy to the Mekong Dr. Geri Richmond all advanced the themes of building supportive environments for budding scientists and beginner entrepreneurs, enhancing educational and research-supporting opportunities and assuring inclusiveness in the S&T sphere. Minister of Science and Technology Nguyen Quan as well as VNU-Ho Chi Minh City President Phan Thanh Binh led a large Vietnamese delegation which included representatives from more than 10 ministries and two universities, as well as seven Vietnam Education Foundation alumni. Over the first two days, five workgroups negotiated action plan items for the next two years in the areas of: health and medical sciences; biotechnology and agriculture; STEM education and research exchange; conservation and environment sciences; hydrology, meteorology, and storm forecasting. The new, ambitious Action Plan will be finalized in the coming months and will serve as a framework for the growing S&T partnership between Vietnam and the United States.
ESTH Vietnam Notes of the Week - December 4,, 2015]

Myanmar Officials Learn New Environmental and Social Standards for the Hydropower Sector

Six IFC, a member of the World Bank Group, on December 2 launched an advisory services program to help Myanmar's Government and private sectors improve environmental and social risk management in hydropower projects. Thirty government officials received the first of several trainings on IFC's Performance Standards, which reflect good international and industry practices for the hydropower sector. "If our goal in Myanmar is sustainability, environmental and social risks associated with hydropower projects must be mitigated" said U Khin Maung Win, Director General, Department of Electric Power Planning, Ministry of Electric Power, Union of Myanmar. "As Myanmar's hydropower sector progresses, we will need the tools and knowledge to ensure sustainability."
Read more about the event [here](#).

Beijing Gets Tough on Red Alert Offenses

Beijing is getting tough with those who violate traffic restrictions and production suspension after the first-ever red alert for smog was issued on December 7. As of 6 p.m. on December 8, the traffic police had found 3,690 breaches of car use restrictions. More than 1,000 cases involving cement trucks and other prohibited vehicles were found on December 8. The municipal environment protection bureau inspected 587 major pollutant dischargers on December 8 and found 38 of them did not abide by the order of production suspension.
[Xinhua, December 9, 2015]

